

## Five minutes with Richard Corbett “The only thing that some countries seem to be interested in is how much they put into the budget and how much they get out, not what it is actually used for.”

by Blog Admin

*This week sees a major European Council summit to resolve the on-going debate over the EU's budget. In an interview with EUOPP editors Chris Gilson and Stuart A Brown, **Richard Corbett**, Adviser to President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, discusses the upcoming summit, the role of the President, and the UK's relationship with and influence in the EU.*



**You've been an adviser to the President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, for nearly three years. How has the office of the presidency evolved over that period?**

It's evolved in the role that it really is, rather than in the role that many people thought it might be. Van Rompuy is not President of Europe in the way that President Obama is President of the United States. There is no overall President of Europe. Each institution, in a system of checks and balances, has its own President, and he has the difficult task of chairing the institution that is perhaps the most difficult of all to chair, which is the European Council. The European Council of heads of state or government (not to be confused with the ordinary Council of ministers) is supposed to be the strategic body laying down the main priorities of the Union, but also in practice the one that deals with crises, or with deadlock elsewhere in the system. But, it needs unanimity to take any policy decisions. Not just unanimity of 27 member states, but of 27 '*prima donnas*' if you don't mind me putting it that way: people, who, in most cases, are used to getting their own way in a national context. Suddenly they're in a meeting with people who they don't work with day in day out, but only periodically, and none of them can do anything unless everyone around the table agrees.

So the President's job is to try and get consensus. How does he do it? With a lot of work upstream of the meetings, talking to everybody, more than once usually, getting an understanding of their position and how far they might be willing to move, putting a text on the table, adjusting it, knocking heads together, persuading, cajoling, until ultimately he gets a result. It is not a very visible role for the wider public, but a crucial one if the European Council is to work. And he happens to be very good at it.

**Do you think the European Council is capable of resolving the debate over the EU budget at this week's summit?**



President of the European Council, Herman van Rompuy – Credit: European Parliament (Creative Commons BY NC ND)

Well that's what the meeting has been called to do! It is extraordinarily difficult; you need unanimity, and afterwards the approval of the European Parliament as well, and positions are divergent. But it really is not an economic problem, it's a

political problem. The divergence now between the maximalist position and the minimalist position is less than 0.05 per cent of GDP, it's not very significant. Politically it is a challenge, because many countries are locked into strongly advocated political positions in favour of this, or against that, and it will be very difficult to reconcile these positions, but that's what the meeting is for. You've got the top political figure of every member state, and the President of the Commission, all around the table for two days, possibly longer, and really they ought to be able to reach a decision.

Unfortunately the focus in some countries on the debate about the *level* of spending – which, let's face it, is not going to vary by a couple of per cent one way or the other – has detracted from the real debate on the *content* of the spending: about shifting money further away from agricultural spending on to research, development, technology and so on; growth-promoting expenditure. Certain states seem to be almost absent from that debate and the only thing that some countries seem to be interested in is how much they put into the budget and how much they get out.

### **Why do you think the UK should stay in the EU?**

For idealistic, pragmatic, and selfish reasons. Idealistically, the countries of our continent have built up a structure that ensures stability and peaceful methods of working together and reconciling differences. We still have our differences, but we argue about them across a negotiating table or a debating chamber. Whereas from the fall of the Roman Empire until 1945, every generation went out and slaughtered each other, this is a better way of doing it, even if it sometimes has its faults.

Pragmatically, we are a group of highly interdependent countries that share the same corner of the world. Whether we like it or not, we're interdependent: economically, ecologically, in all kinds of ways. We need a structure to find common solutions to common problems, where we need to act jointly.

And the selfish point of view is that Britain has more than half of its trade with the European Union. The European single market is the world's largest single market, it's vital for 3.5-4 million British jobs and for the British economy. It's not just a question of having access to that market; it's a question of also being around the table where the decisions on the common rules for the common market are made, in order to defend our interests.

### **Are Eurosceptic parties like the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) good for British and European politics?**

Constructive criticism is always good, but I wouldn't say that UKIP are constructively critical. They can be very destructive: they invent stories, they spread myths. They are entirely negative in their outlook about the European Union, so I don't think that I would personally say that UKIP is a good thing, no.

### **Last week you were voted by EurActiv as the 4<sup>th</sup> most influential Briton on EU policy. As the UK government pursues an increasingly Eurosceptic line, do you think that the UK's influence in Europe is at risk?**

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On my supposed ranking, I think it's more flattering than it is accurate. On British influence, Britain is a member of the EU, it has representatives in all the institutions, and it participates in the overwhelming majority of European Union policies. So on the face of it, it should, and it does in many ways, have as much influence as everybody else. The question arises, I think, because of the accumulation of things at the moment that lead other member states to conclude that Britain is disengaging from the European Union. There's the issue of the Multiannual Financial Framework (the EU budget), with Britain seemingly locked into a very restrictive position. There are the events of last December which led to Britain

blocking amendments to the EU Treaty, and which led the other member states having to make a separate treaty alongside the EU Treaty. There is the debate about possibly opting out of police and justice cooperation; there is talk in the future of renegotiating the terms of membership. There are some who talk of a referendum to withdraw from the European Union. Others notice all this.

Britain is of course already seen by others as a country that not only does not participate in the euro, but also not in Schengen, not in all aspects of justice and home affairs, has a special protocol interpreting the charter of rights, and has a special rebate on the budget. So, the way other member states see this, they certainly have the perception of a country that many of them consider to be disengaging with the EU. If a country is seen to be disengaging, it carries obviously far less weight in the serious negotiations.

**The LSE's Professor Simon Hix was also on the list of influential Britons on the EU: the only academic. Do you think UK academics need to do more to engage with EU policy-making?**

Well I think that there's quite a few academics, Simon is quite a pre-eminent one of course, that do engage, and I wouldn't be against more engagement. But, it's important that European academics are not in a ghetto of European studies, European specialists, that are the only ones who know about the EU. I think it's important that, across the board, academics in whatever field they are in are aware of the European dimension of that field.

**Do you think the euro will still exist in its present form in five years' time?**

The euro will certainly still exist. In ten years' time there may be more member states; I don't think that there will be fewer. The speculation is about Greece leaving, but Greece is an outlier, an exceptional situation that is not comparable to what has happened in some other countries. But Greece leaving doesn't actually help Greece, or anybody else. If the idea is that Greece reintroduces the drachma, and then devalues by about 50 per cent, it won't help. Greece imports almost all of its energy and half of its food. Devaluation would therefore double the cost of those primary things in the Greek economy, causing immense hardship and triggering very high inflation. It would also have other implications: a collapse of their banking system, disorderly default, being shut out of international credit markets and all the rest of it.

We've seen over the last two years every effort being made to make sure Greece has time to turn the corner, difficult as the situation is, with the biggest ever loan of that kind in international history to any country, a long-term, low-interest loan, without which Greece's situation, awful as it is, would be even worse. The idea that the EU is imposing austerity on Greece, when it is in fact alleviating the situation, is a striking part of the debate. But yes, the euro will still exist.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and*



UK PM David Cameron and European Council President Herman van Rompuy Credit: President of the European Council (Creative Commons BY NC ND)

*Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author

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Richard Corbett was an MEP for the Yorkshire and the Humber, serving between 1996 and 2009. He is currently adviser to the President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy.



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